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SUBJECT: West Beirut: Declining Security and the
American University of Beirut []

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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

13 June 1986

West Beirut: Declining Security and the
American University of Beirut [redacted]

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SummaryWest Beirut "is a desert stalked by ravenous wolves"
(Walid Jumblatt 18 April 1986)

The continuing power struggle among Lebanon's Muslim militias is transforming West Beirut--once the major commercial, intellectual, and tourist center of the Arab world--into a lawless, militarized zone contested by confessional and ideological factions. Turf battles, terrorism, rampant street crime, and the lack of centralized authority have made the area extremely dangerous for both local residents and foreigners. The deep schisms between members of the same sect or religious affiliation are giving rise to extremist organizations such as the Shia Hizballah movement which is bent on transforming that half of the city into a center for Shia fundamentalist activities in Lebanon. [redacted]

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The proliferation of competing militias contributes to increasing political fragmentation and shifting political fortunes--a situation which almost certainly will ensure that West Beirut remains in a state of conflict for the foreseeable future. Whenever one faction appears to be gaining too much turf at the expense of other groups, a realignment quickly ensues assuring a virtual parity between combatants. [redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] the Levant Branch, Arab-Israeli Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Information as of 13 June 1986 was used in its preparation. Questions and comments should be addressed to Chief, Arab-Israeli Division, [redacted]

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[redacted]

The increasing lawlessness in West Beirut has curtailed markedly social and economic activities of western institutions, and at the same time has made them more susceptible to blackmail. The American University of Beirut has been disrupted badly and its future is in doubt. AUB continues to perform badly needed services, however, and key militia leaders will seek to protect it. [redacted]

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Since the Israeli invasion of June 1982, and the subsequent departure of the Palestinian fighters from West Beirut, Sunni, Druze, and Shia militias have been aggressively vying for control of the various neighborhoods. The traditional sectarian neighborhoods are blurred as a result of continuously changing military fortunes of the various militias. The result has been a steady decline of security and safety not only for the remaining few foreign residents, but for the rest of the population as well. [redacted]

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West Beirut today is a patchwork of small areas loosely controlled by confessional and ideological militia and many plain gangs. Amal and the Druze militias are the major contenders for power in West Beirut, but smaller, sometimes more extremist groups constantly challenge the authority of the major militias. Many fighters remain uncommitted to any single militia and are eager to fight on behalf of any cause or leader in return for cash. [redacted] there are 44 distinct organizations competing in West Beirut. [redacted]

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The accelerating return of Palestinian fighters in recent months is aggravating the security situation in West Beirut. [redacted] Lebanese President Amin Gemayel has offered PLO Chairman Yasir Arafat 5000 passports to facilitate the return of Palestinian fighters into Lebanon to stem growing Syrian and Shia influence in West Beirut. To stop PLO infiltration Syrian [redacted] officers have recently begun checking passports at the Beirut Airport, but Palestinian guerrillas are also infiltrating into Lebanon through various ports, such as the illegal Druze port at Khaldah, south of Beirut. [redacted]

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The on-going "Camps War" between Amal--the Shia mainstream organization--and the Palestinians is freeing the radical Shia group Hizballah to carry out its campaign of terror against both Lebanese and the few remaining westerners in West Beirut. The

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[redacted]

growth of Hizballah's role came about as a result of the last year's Camp Wars which pitted the Amal militia and its supporter the Lebanese Army's Sixth Brigade against the Palestinians in Sabra, Shatila, and Burj Al Barajinah Camps. [redacted]

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[redacted] many of the areas currently controlled by Hizballah originally belonged to Amal, which was forced to relinquish them as the fighting became unexpectedly intense. [redacted]

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The Sunnis, who traditionally held an important political position second only to the Christians, are now at the mercy of others. Defeated and politically disorganized, the Sunnis of West Beirut, both moderates and extremists, are gradually losing control of their neighborhoods to other militias. Hizballah gunmen are growing in strength in traditional Sunni areas. [redacted]

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[redacted]

[redacted] The most important Hizballah area is located in the Sunni heartland of Basta, just northwest of the Green Line separating East and West Beirut. [redacted]

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The defeat of the Sunni Sixth of February Movement in early June helped Amal gain control of strategic Sunni territory near the Sabra and Shatila Camps. Amal military leaders are eager to consolidate their grip on Sabra and Shatila in order to link up with the sprawling southern Shia Suburbs--a move which is likely to be opposed by both the Druze and the extremist Hizballah who are adamant about preventing Amal from creating a Shia mini-state inside West Beirut. [redacted]

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The Druze--who control significant turf around the former American Embassy, the American University, and the winding beachhead south of the Embassy--want West Beirut to remain free from any single militia domination. The Druze Progressive Socialist Party has attracted many Sunnis and Kurds to its ranks in the last year because those communities have no strong militias of their own and want to fight the Shia takeover. [redacted]

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[redacted]

The war among the confessional groups in West Beirut often manifests itself through car bombings, kidnappings, and political assassination. Each of the major militias is believed to be holding several hundred hostages from other confessional groups. The release last month of 33 political prisoners by the Christian militia in East Beirut did little to alleviate the deep division between East and West Beirut, and in fact led to the kidnapping of Christian professor Nabil Matar from the American University

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[redacted]

of Beirut by the previously unknown Independent Movement for the Liberation of the Kidnapped. We believe that this movement is an offshoot of the Hizballah. [redacted]

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No one is immune from the rising tide of violence in West Beirut. The foreign community continues to live in constant fear. Political assassinations are becoming a daily occurrence with attempts frequently directed at Armenians, other Christians, and any other politically active faction. The US Embassy in Beirut reports that a wave of assassinations is currently underway against Lebanese Army officers accused of spying on local militias. Another Embassy report states that the collapse of security, and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism is forcing even the Soviet Union to curtail its diplomatic, cultural, and military missions. The same report indicate that the Soviets have put out discreet feelers for a building in East Beirut which could be used as a cultural center or perhaps a chancery. The remaining embassies are hiring local militias to guard them. The Druze militia is emerging as the key guardian of Soviet and western interests in West Beirut. Most foreign banks are hiring private guards to protect them from robberies. [redacted]

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AUB: A Lamp Set on a Hill in Danger

The American University of Beirut and the American University Hospital are two remaining western institutions that have endured despite the rapidly declining security around them. Founded in 1868, the university helped shape and maintain Lebanon's pro western orientation. The US Embassy in Beirut reports that the university which has survived previous rounds of Lebanese internal violence and deep social splits separating the upper classes from the immigrants and refugees, is now facing the greatest threat to its existence. The AUB community environment is changing from one of tolerance and hopefulness to suspicion and despair. [redacted]

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Waves of kidnappings, murders and threats against AUB and AUH personnel have drastically reduced the number of both foreign faculty and foreign students. The campaign is aimed against AUB's role in promoting western democratic values. [redacted]

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[redacted] Hizballah has a clandestine cell at AUB whose goal is to turn the university into an Islamic institution. Repeated strikes by university and hospital personnel have failed to gain the release of several kidnapped faculty and staff, but have succeeded in publicizing the plight of the institution. [redacted]

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[redacted]

The violence against AUB goes on, but the major militias in Beirut want the university's services to continue and have issued statements condemning the faculty kidnappings. Druze leader Walid Jumblatt and Shia leader Nabih Bari have repeatedly supported AUB and have condemned lawlessness on the campus. More than 60 percent of today's AUB students are Shia, most of whom oppose the kidnappings of their teachers, and their fellow students by the extremists Hizballah. The alumnae of the university are so concerned about the well being of the university that they have now formed the Committee for Salvation of AUB to help oversee security with the local militias and to counter increasing Islamic fanaticism on campus. [redacted]

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No western institution has endured as much anguish as the American University Hospital. The Hospital is still considered one of the best in the region but as the fighting rages in West Beirut, the AUH looks more like a MASH unit under fire than a teaching facility. There is an unwritten agreement among Beirut's warring factions to keep the hospital a neutral zone, but violence often spills into operating and waiting rooms as rival militias are brought in for treatment. Most casualties treated at the AUH are civilians caught in the cross fires--few are private paying patients. Increased governmental economic and financial problems, coupled with a declining US aid is forcing the AUH to operate with a \$5.5 million deficit. The dramatic decline of the Lebanese pound in recent months, and the constant presence of militias loitering on hospital property are preventing paying patients from utilizing the AUH services. [redacted]

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Outlook

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No improvement in the security situation in Beirut is in the cards, but the lack of any other credible educational institutions in West Beirut, will ensure continued support for both AUB and AUH by local residents. The decline of security around the campus however will hamper efforts by university administrators to keep them functioning at anything near normalcy. We are unable to assess specifically the impact of declining security on the daily activities in classrooms but it certainly will be negative. Nonetheless, there continues to be a great deal of effort by students, faculty and staff to safeguard the legacy of AUB at any cost. [redacted]

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Turf battles in Beirut will continue. An entire generation reared in civil war conditions is coming of age in West Beirut. Many young militia members know no other condition; fighting to

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them is a major part of everyday life. The accelerating economic decline will most certainly encourage the dwindling middle classes to join ranks with street fighters to survive. []

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The extremists almost certainly will continue to gain at the expense of the moderates. Militancy, particularly in the Shia community, is likely to spread as the political and economic crisis drags on. The US Embassy in Beirut reports that increasing economic problems are creating a bleak picture in West Beirut, as people talk more often of an imminent famine. []

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Moderate Muslim leaders probably will remain afraid to denounce extremists for fear of retribution. For example, [] vandals in West Beirut broke into cars belonging to the Sunni chairman of the Municipality Department after he announced a plan to coordinate services with officials in East Beirut. []

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Hizballah's power in West Beirut is likely to continue growing as long as it goes unchecked by the other militias. Hizballah's strategy includes the purging of Beirut of foreign influence, the avoidance of prolonged military entanglement with any other local militia, the weakening of Amal, and the weakening of leftist militias such as the Lebanese Communist Party. A clash between the communists and Hizballah elements last February ended in a draw, but Hizballah continues to carry out assassinations against communist leaders and their supporters. []

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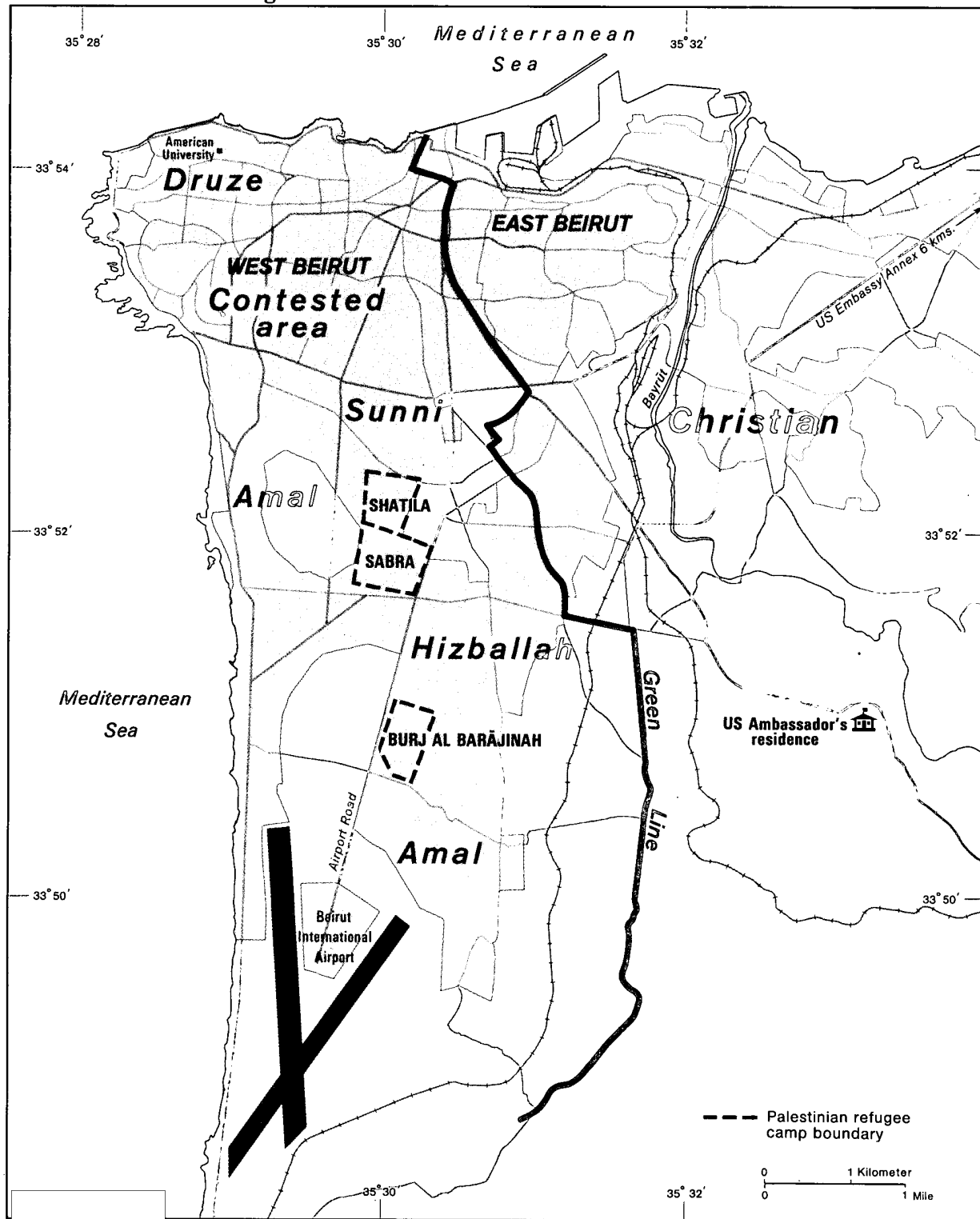
Much of West Beirut will remain a contested arena, with the Druze and Amal remaining, at least for now, the leading contenders for power. Realignments and constantly shifting coalitions will most likely ensure that no single militia will be capable of controlling this increasingly restless segment of the city. Beirutis are now accustomed to the daily violence around them, and are likely to continue putting up with declining security by increasingly retreating back to the neighborhoods for both safety and protection. In this environment AUB will face an uncertain future at best. []

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Militia-Controlled Neighborhoods in Beirut



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